BOOK REVIEWS

Origins of Mythology

Hamlet's Mill: An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time. By Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend. Pp. xiv+505. (Macmillan: London, November 1970.) 84*s*.

Professor Giorgio de Santillana and Professor Hertha von Dechend have produced a work of great learning for which no scholar of equal stature will have anything but respect. In its own field it fully achieves its aims. For the benefit of non-specialists, however, some words of explanation are necessary.

First, the title. This will cause mystification to all but the most erudite. In Scandinavian mythology, the Icelandic original of Hamlet was a hero named Amlodhi. He was identified, "in the crude and vivid imagery of the Norse", by the ownership of a fabled mill. This mill in Amlodhi's own time ground out peace and plenty, but in later, more decadent, times it ground out salt, and finally, having landed at the bottom of the sea, rock and sand. This was the well-known Maelstrom, "the grinding stream", which was supposed to be a way to the land of the dead.

In this book the authors set out on a long intellectual journey to discover the mill's significance. They voyage through many lands and civilizations as far apart geographically and culturally as ancient Greece and the Mexico of the Mayas. Persia and India are thrown in for good measure, and in Europe the voyage takes them from the Arctic Circle in Finland to most of the Mediterranean shores.

On the way they make an almost bewildering series of references to beliefs, legends, superstitions and significant statements discovered in other books. Most of these are documented in a bibliography thirty pages long which itself must have taken weeks to prepare and check.

In addition there are numerous line reproductions of subjects as varied as Mesopotamian cylinder seals, calabashes from the Guinea coast of Africa, signs of the Zodiac from Roman Egypt, the Maya Codex, and Athanasius Kircher's concept of the subterranean flow of rivers. There are very few reproductions of photographs, which is fortunate because these are unworthy of the physical production of the work as a whole. The scholarly trappings include a self-effacing preface by Professor de Santillana, an introduction, a list of abbreviations and no less than thirty-nine appendices occupying 98 printed pages. The index is useful and the entries well chosen.

Now what does all this effort add up to? What do the authors conclude? They conclude, to put it at its briefest, first, that all the world's great myths have a common origin, and second, that the places referred to in the myths are not on the earth but in the heavens. In short, myth was the way in which astronomical observation was interpreted and the knowledge it led to passed on.

My criticism of the work does not concern the quality of the scholarship displayed which is, as might be expected, impeccable. It is based on a feeling that scholarship can be overdone and can dry up the spirit of life in a subject. To devote such immense labour to presenting a theme of this kind at a length of 505 pages, including all the appendices, is rather like using a sledge hammer to crack a nut. One thinks of the people, the lands and the cultures referred to; the immense vitality of the questing human beings of the past, as frightened, as courageous and as full of joy and tears as we are today. One thinks of—and longs for—"the crude and vivid imagery of the Norse".

In ancient Greek times subjects of profound significance to man were discussed by Socrates and his fellows with lively informality, and Herodotus told the stories of his travels in gay and gusty prose. The richness of life is as apparent today in these writings as it was more than two millennia ago. The present book, sadly to my mind, belongs more to the world of the Middle Ages, when the value of a scholar's work was largely assessed by his knowledge of the writings of other scholars. For me, *Hamlet's Mill* evokes the atmosphere of a cultured common room rather than the spirit of deeply felt personal experience.

RICHARD CARRINGTON

Government Below Ground

Beneath the City Streets: A Private Enquiry into the Nuclear Preoccupations of Government. By Peter Laurie. Pp. viii+247. (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press: London, October 1970.) 42*s*.

MR LAURIE, a free lance journalist, has done some diligent digging and pieced together a quite detailed picture of the British government's preparations for dealing with a nuclear attack and its aftermath. He provides us with maps of everything from emergency electrical grids to food storage depots and networks of secret tunnels under London. Where official data are unavailable, he fills in with guesses which seem at least plausible. He speculates on unpublicized civil defence functions of a number of "government citadels", and even suggests possible locations for the emergency seat of national government.

For his detective work, the author rates high marks; unfortunately, he also has some very foolish things to say about nuclear war, its effects on people, and the prospects for recovery in case it should occur. Mr Laurie belongs to the "nuclear war is not all that bad" school. He is convinced that the destructiveness of nuclear weapons has been much exaggerated: the perennial British overcast will blunt the effects of thermal radiation; the brick buildings will cut down on blast damage; and so on. Mr Laurie shrugs off millions of casualties in the best Herman Kahn manner. For example, he blithely dismisses the damage which a one-megaton explosion can inflict on a city like London as "negligible", pointing out that it would kill only about as many people (310,000 is his estimate) as ordinarily die from natural causes in two years! He takes comfort in the fact that it would be "very difficult" for an attacker to kill more than 37 per cent of the British population. If those assessments strike the reader as somewhat callous, there is worse to come. At the end of a chapter entitled "Recovery From a Nuclear War", Mr Laurie presents us with an extraordinary catalogue of benefits which Britain stands to derive from a large scale nuclear attack. Such an attack would at least (and I quote verbatim):

"(i) Demolish most of Britain's slum houses.

(ii) Reduce the population to thirty-five million, a level which some people feel would be quite comfortable for these islands.

(iii) By the end of the recovery period the ratio of population to fixed assets might be higher* than it had been before the attack—the survivors would be better off.

(iv) It would decentralize government.

(v) And solve the balance of payments problem".

One is tempted to compare this remarkable passage with Dean Swift's *Modest Proposal*. But alas, Mr Laurie is completely serious.

Estimating the rate of recovery from a large scale nuclear war is at best a highly uncertain exercise. Past experience is an unreliable guide, because so many of the problems to be faced would be totally

* From the context, it seems the author meant to say lower.